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Agenda for action

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While Americans are all pumped up by a daring in-flight interception of terrorists, perhaps we ought to use this moment of elation to look at the grim facts of the terror situation. Only then can we plan ahead.

First: The terror war is directed in large measure against America. There have been 600 to 700 terror incidents this year; terror experts say that a third to 40 percent of these have been directed against us. The terrorists claim to attack America for a variety of reasons: our support for Israel or for our European allies, because we won't put pressure on Kuwait, because they want ransom money, because they don't like Western values.

Second: The sad truth is that terror is often a successful strategy. A terror story dominates our media. This puts the spotlight on terrorist grievances. Sometimes it forces a change in policy. Terrorism drove our Marines out of Lebanon.

Third: Our potential responses

are limited. We can't count on much help from others, even friends. The Italians won the Olympic gold medal for cravenness when they released Muhammed "Abu" Abbas. The Egyptians and the Yugoslavians weren't much better.

Fourth: The Soviets are behind much of the terror training infrastructure. But they are off-limits; we're not going to risk a major conflict to combat terror.

Fifth: We're not going to wholly win this war, no matter what we do. Terrorists willing to die can continue to cause turmoil.

What can we do? Beef up all our options, in order to provide a better menu for case-by-case response. Here are some ideas, some reasonable, some far-out — many gleaned from American anti-terror experts:

- The president should repeal the executive order against assassination. If we are able to hunt down a terrorist, our agent should be able to kill him.

- Appoint more sky marshals and travel marshals. (If the Italians had had a couple of marshals on the *Achille Lauro*, the murderers probably could have been stopped in their tracks.)

- Develop short-term economic sanctions that might be usable in certain circumstances. What would the Yugoslavians have done with Abbas if they had known that if he were released

we wouldn't allow any of those new "Yugo" cars into the United States? Would the Italians or Egyptians have behaved differently if they had known that we might discourage tourism for a few months? (We have steel quotas — how about tourist quotas?)

- Deploy some of our anti-terrorist Delta Force over there, not over here. There may be occasions when we'll want to use it without wasting hours.

- Bolster our covert intelligence capability. We don't know enough. We are still paying for the emasculation of the CIA in the 1970s.

- Ask the television industry to see if it can develop a code of self-restraint in dealing with terror incidents. Other professions have self-policing codes. We don't have to be on the air about terror every minute of every day.

- Consider covert or direct strikes against non-Soviet regimes that encourage terrorism: Libya, Iran, Syria, the Palestine Liberation Organization.

- Get very tough, very fast, on terror in America. Pull out all stops to find the killer of Alex Odeh of the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Council. The worst result of all would be if terror came here.

- Stop the turf wars in the U.S. bureaucracy. Appoint an anti-terrorism czar to knock heads at State, Defense, Justice, CIA.

Is it worth it? Action will cost us — even if we pick and choose carefully from an expanded set of options. But lack of action has its consequences, too. In our case it would mean the perception of national impotency. An impotent nation is not called "leader of the Free World."

Ben Wattenberg is a nationally syndicated columnist.